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(54) Acoustic printhead and photoetching of acoustic lenses for acoustic ink printing

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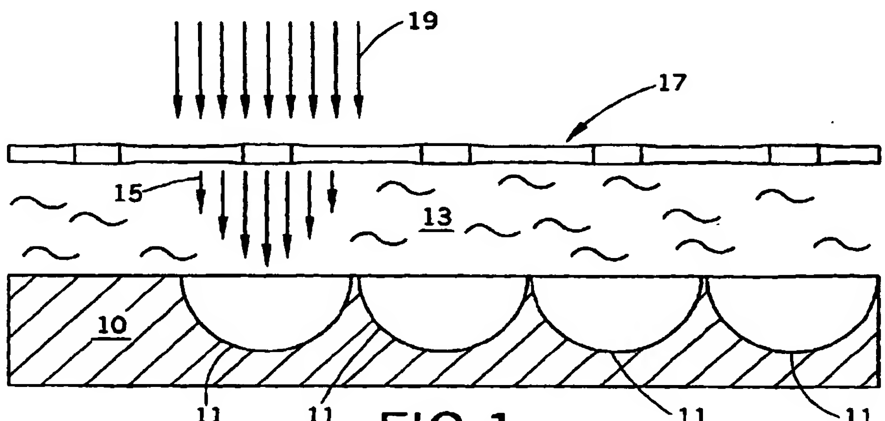

FIG.1

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Description

[0001] This invention relates generally to acoustic ink printing (AIP) and more particularly to an improved acoustic lens for AIP. In addition, the present invention is directed to an improved process for the manufacture of acoustic lenses, and in fact, lenses for a variety of applications.

[0002] AIP is a method for transferring ink directly to a recording medium having several advantages over other direct printing methodologies. One important advantage is that it does not need nozzles and ejection orifices that may cause many of the reliability (e.g. clogging) and picture element (i.e. pixel) placement accuracy problems which conventional drop on demand and continuous stream ink jet printers have experienced. Since AIP avoids the clogging and manufacturing problems associated with drop on demand, nozzle based ink jet printing, it represents a promising direct marking technology. In general, the process is generally directed to utilization of bursts of focused acoustic energy to emit droplets from a free surface of a liquid on to a recording medium.

[0003] To be competitive with other printer types, acoustic ink printers must produce high quality images at low cost. To meet such requirements, it is advantageous to fabricate printheads with a large number of individual droplet emitters. While specific AIP implementations may vary, and while additional components may be used, each droplet emitter will include an ultrasonic transducer (attached to one surface of a body), an activator for switching the droplet emitter on or off, an acoustic lens, and a cavity holding ink such that the ink's free surface is near the acoustic focal area of the acoustic lens. The individual droplet emitter is activated by the appropriate selection of the associated row and column of the array.

[0004] Traditionally, a fresnel lens has been used in the AIP process. While fresnel lenses have proven generally satisfactory, an improved acoustic lens approaching a more perfect semi-spherical form and, of course, a process for its manufacture would be desirable.

[0005] This invention relates to accoustic lens having a first layer of a photosoluble material including a generally concave parabolic recess, an acoustic wave generating element, and a source which activates the wave generating element. In addition, the present invention is directed to a method of manufacturing the lens comprising photoetching of a layer of material. Advantageously, the photoetching process can use incoherent or laser light. The light may be intensity modulated or intensity modified. Similarly, the etchant materials may be dry, wet or liquid. In this context, "dry" etching generally refers to a gas phase wherein wetting of the photoetch material does not occur while "wet" etching refers to a liquid or vapor phase wherein at least a molecular coating of the photoetch material occurs. Preferably, when incoherent light is used, the invention will utilize an overlayer or mask to control the etching process. The invention is adaptable to both front or back side light exposure. In a particularly preferred form of the invention, a reflow procedure will be utilized to smooth the etched parabolic recess.

[0006] The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and constitute a part of the specification illustrate one embodiment of the invention, and together with the description, serve to explain the principles of the invention.

[0007] Of the drawings:

Fig. 1 is a schematic representation of a representative etching procedure;
Fig. 2 is an enlarged sectional view of a printhead including the present inventive lens; and
Fig. 3 is an enlarged side elevation view, partially in cross section, of a lens.

[0008] Referring now to Figure 1, the general inventive procedure is demonstrated wherein a substrate 10 is provided and shaped, generally parabolic, lens recesses 11 are etched therein. Particularly, an etching solution 13 is provided above substrate 10 and exposed to a patterned light 15 created with mask 17 from collimated light source 19. Generally, the mask will be formed of chrome on glass, however many suitable combinations will be known to those skilled in the art. In the absence of the light the etch rate is negligible compared to the rate in the presence of the light. In this manner, a finished substrate including columns and rows of aligned lenses can be formed.

[0009] Referring now to Fig. 2, each lens is addressed with an individual acoustic generation means for assembly into an AIP printhead 21. A particularly preferred acoustic generation means includes a thin film piezoelectric transducer 23 which is in electrical connection with an rf drive voltage (source not shown). In operation, lens 11 launches a converging acoustic beam 25 into a pool of ink 27. The focal length of the lens 11 is designed so that the beam 25 comes to focus on or near the free surface 29 of the pool 27, thereby ejecting droplet 31 of ink on demand.

[0010] In a particularly preferred form of the invention, the substrate 10 is comprised of a photosoluble glass, metal oxide doped silica such as Corning 1737, a metal oxide, a plastic or any other material known to one skilled in the art. The two primary requirements are that the material have (i) an acoustic velocity approximately 5 times greater than the liquid of the pool, and (ii) be photoetchable. A particular advantage of the present invention, when the parabolic shaped lens is used, is that the non-spherical shapes allow lower velocity ratios, e.g. 2x, to be used.

[0011] The invention is not particularly limited with respect to the type of photoetching system used. More particularly, the invention is suitable for use with coherent or incoherent light and collimated or focussed light.

In this regard, the procedure can be performed with an incoherent broad beam collimated light in combination with a mask or in the absence of a mask by using a spatially-scanned, intensity modulated laser. In addition, the UV radiation exposure can be performed from a front side of the substrate or the back side of the substrate, if the substrate is transparent to the UV.

[0012] With respect to the etching system, gas, vapor or liquid etching can be used. A continuous gas flow is preferred with the gas/vapor and if liquid is opted for, slight vibration can be imparted to the substrate to provide greater uniformity for etching. A variety of excellent examples of etching systems suitable to the present invention exist. In this apparatus a housing, including a vacuum chamber which receives the substrate to be etched is provided. A vacuum pump is used to pull a vacuum in the chamber and a halogen based gas is introduced into the chamber. This halogen based gas is capable of forming a glass etching species when activated by light. A light source for transmitting a light beam of a predetermined wave length and intensity through the gas is also provided. A mask is optically coupled to the light source for patterning the light beam to provide the desired excitation of the halogen etching gas on the substrate. The preferred etching gas is xenon difluoride. The light source is stated to be either a carbon dioxide laser or an excimer laser. Of course, the system can be modified by utilization of a contacting mask (i.e., one formed in proximity to the etching substrate) or any other means known to one skilled in the art.

[0013] An additional system suitable for use with the present invention is a vacuum chamber within which a substrate to be etched is housed. A vacuum is created and a plasma containing a reactive ion etching species such as O_2, F_2 or stable organic halides such as CF_4 is introduced. In this system, a repetitive discharge source creates an ultraviolet light having a continuing wave length range of 600 to 1,000 angstroms is provided.

[0014] In a preferred form of the invention, the substrate is a photoetchable glass. Photoetchable glass is preferably a photosensitive amorphous glass-type formed by adding a metallic ion, and sensitizer to a silicate glass. Such glass, when exposed to ultraviolet light and heat treated, produces a metal colloid with crystalline nuclei. The crystal structure is extremely fine making the glass easily dissolvable in acid. This also follows for the etching to finally defined structures. Examples of such glass are Corning 1737, FOTURAN made by the optical division of Schott Glaswreke of Mainz, Germany and PEG 3 made by the optical division of Hoya Corporation of Tokyo, Japan.

[0015] It should be noted that the skilled artisan will recognize that the etching process is highly controlled by temperature and pressure. Accordingly, variation of these parameters of the system will allow the practitioner to tailor the process to achieve the desirable etching rate and thus lens shape.

[0016] Accordingly, the present invention can operate with the following basic systems and variations thereon:

1) front or rear focused or narrow modulated laser (no mask);
2) front or rear lamp or defocused laser with contact mask;
3) front or rear lamp or defocused laser with relieved mask;
4) systems one, two or three with gas/vapor etch; or
5) systems one, two or three with liquid etch.

[0017] The preferred process will form a sheet of acoustic lenses suitable for use in an AIP process via a gas phase photoetching with back side U.V. radiation from a spatially-scanned, intensity-modulated laser. The preferred shape of the etched lens is achieved with reference again to Figure 1, by an intensity modified laser light pattern, having the highest intensity at the desired deepest portion of the lens, and having progressively diminishing intensity outwardly toward the edges of each individual acoustic lens. In this manner, etching is more significant in the central portion to achieve the desired concave parabolic, spherical or other shape.

[0018] Referring now to Figure 3, the preferred lens shape includes an angle of approximately 80 to 150 determined by the angle . In a particularly preferred form of the invention, the acoustic lens formed by the etching process will be further modified to improve the surface roughness thereof. In this regard, the photoetching process described above does not necessarily yield a perfectly smooth inner surface. For example, a surface 33 may be formed from a first photoetching. Accordingly, a reflow procedure to improve surface roughness may be employed. More particularly, a localized heating/etching procedure could be utilized to remelt/reflow the surface of the formed lens and achieve a roughness of less than One tenth of an acoustic wavelength in the liquid. Similarly, the lens could be coated with a thin layer 35 of a low melting point glass or plastic, and heated to achieve a reflow of the added material. The material should be chosen to have an acoustic impedance, ρv [where ρ is the material density and v is the acoustic velocity] which closely matches that of the substrate material. Preferably, the added material would have a lower melting temperature than the base substrate material. Surface tension causes a minimization of free surface area and a consequent reduction in surface roughness.

[0019] In a particularly preferred embodiment of the invention, an over layer is provided which acts as an acoustic anti-reflective matching layer to suppress unwanted reflections. More specifically, a layer of thickness approximately $\lambda/4$ [where λ is an acoustic wavelength] of impedance matching material 37 may be coated on the concave surface of lens 12. The acoustic impedance ρv of the matching layer should approximate

the square root of the product of the impedances of the substrate material and the liquid. Similarly, an overcoat (not shown) having an acoustic impedance and an acoustic velocity intermediate those of the ink and the substrate may be deposited on the concave surface to planarize the printhead. Preferably this overcoat will be selected from the group including parylene and other conformally deposited materials.

[0020] A further preferred embodiment of the invention is the use of back side illumination and a mask or a laser modulation which achieves a formation of alignment marks (32; Figure 3) on the back side of the substrate. In this regard, the alignment marks can be utilized for the appropriate locating of the transducers, generally formed of zinc oxide, at the appropriate location adjacent each of the lenses. Therefore, assembly of the AIP print head is more easily accomplished.

[0021] Finally, it is noted that the present invention is not solely limited to the generation of acoustic lenses. More specifically, an array of lenses for focusing light can be produced via the above-described techniques. Of course, a light focusing lens would typically be convex in its formation. Nonetheless, such a result could be readily achieved via the use of a procedure as described above.

Claims

1. An acoustic printhead for ejecting individual droplets of liquid on demand from a free surface of a supply of liquid; the printhead comprising:

   a plate of photosoluble glass, silica, metal oxide, or plastic having a lower surface and an upper surface with a plurality of generally parabolic or spherical shaped recesses forming lenses therein; a plurality of acoustic wave generating elements attached to the lower surface of said plate and positioned such that acoustic waves from said generating elements selectively impact said lenses causing converging acoustic beams into the liquid, wherein focal lengths of said lenses cause said beams to come to focus on spaced apart points at approximately the free surface of the liquid.

2. A method of fabricating a lens comprising the steps of providing a photosoluble substrate having opposed first and second surfaces; exposing one of the surfaces of the substrate to a photoactive etchant; and exposing said etchant to specifically patterned light such that a controlled convex or concave, generally semispherical bulge or recess is formed in said substrate.

3. The method of claim 2 including the step of performing a reflow of the surface of said bulge or recess

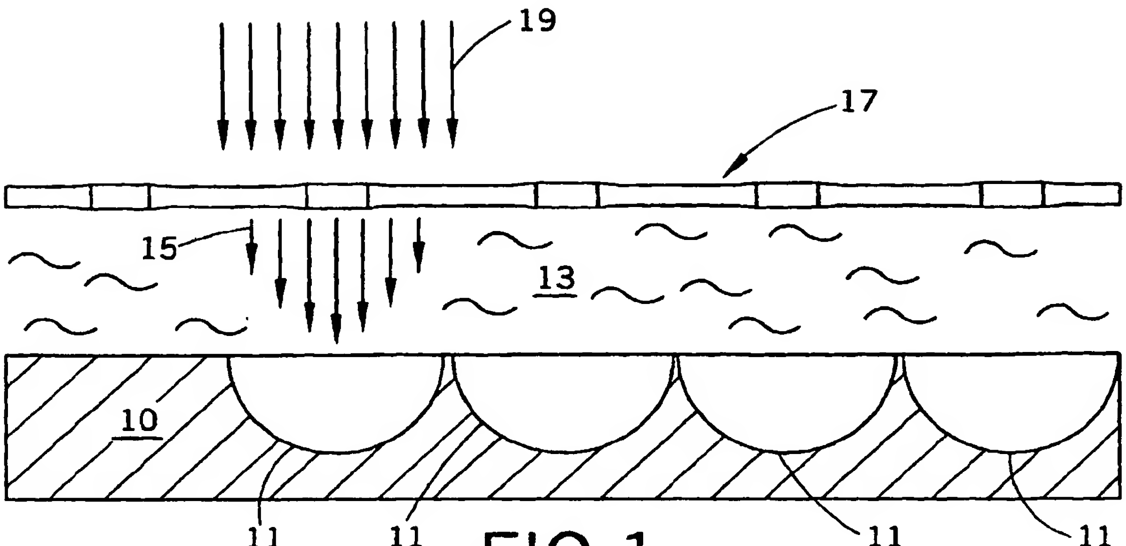

FIG.1

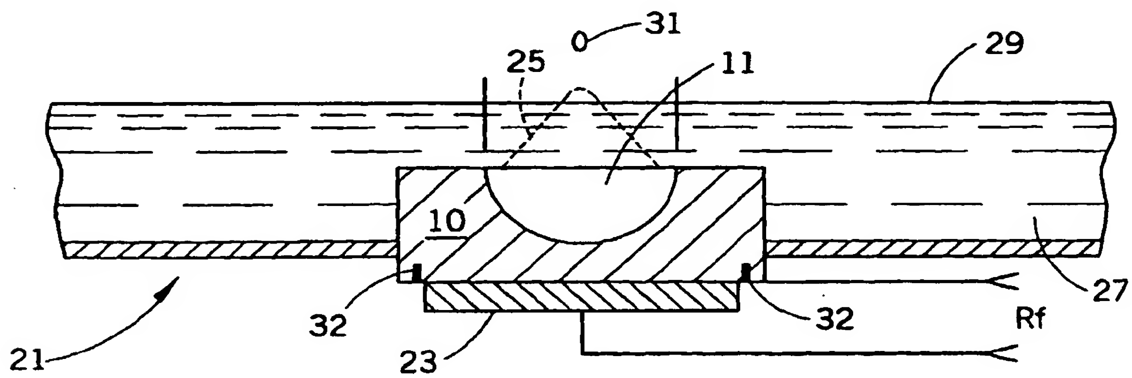

FIG.2

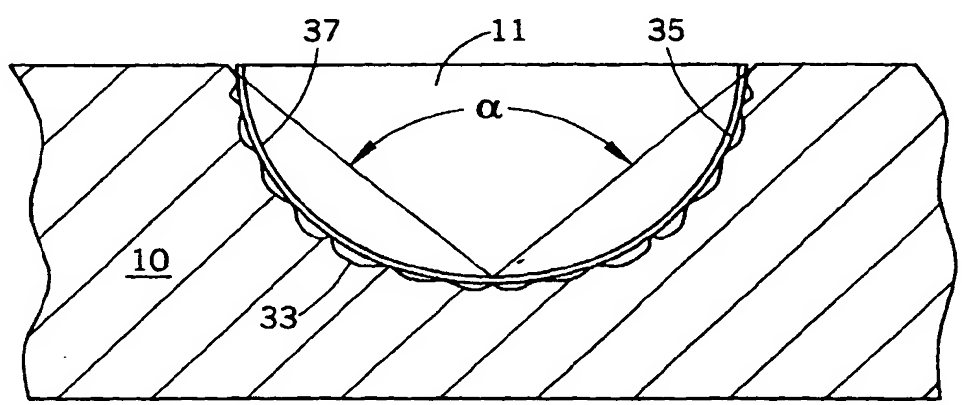

FIG.3

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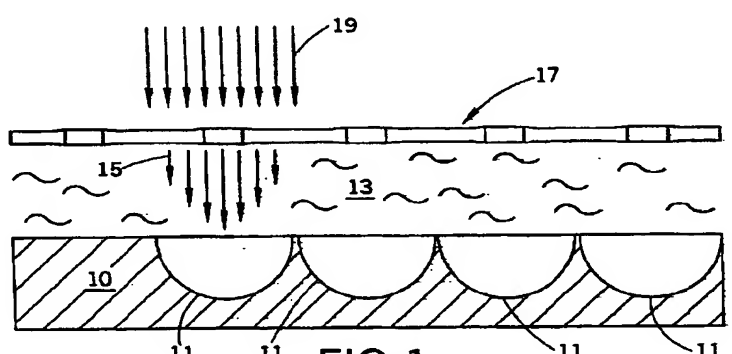

FIG. 1

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EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 99 12 1494

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CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int.Cl.7)
B41J2/04
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TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.7)
G03F
B41J

The present search report has been drawn up for all claims

Place of search	Date of completion of the search	Examiner
THE HAGUE	25 September 2000	Bardet, M

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